

Statement of

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**“Reclaiming Our Image and Identity for the Next Seven Generations”**

**Introduction**

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman, Mr. Vice-Chairman, and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear here today. My name is Andrew Lee; my Seneca Indian name is Ono-dah-geyh.<sup>1</sup> I have the pleasure of serving as a trustee of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian, as well as numerous other boards and advisory councils in service to Indian Country. Currently, I am an executive at Aetna Inc., where I am president of one of Aetna’s new non-insurance businesses, serve on the board of directors for the Aetna Foundation, and lead an employee resource group dedicated to American Indian issues. I also have the honor of serving as a Young Global Leader of the World Economic Forum, which each year selects up to 200 individuals under age 40 from around the world who share a commitment to shaping the global future.

**My Personal and Professional Journey**

As a mixed heritage Native, it took me many years to become comfortable with my identity. As a boy, I thought being half-Seneca was a convenient novelty. To my non-Indian friends, it meant I was naturally good at shooting arrows, playing lacrosse, and connecting with the outdoors. By high school, I did not think about or talk very much about my heritage because I wanted to be just like all the other non-Native kids. In college, my attitude changed when I met a professor who challenged me to imagine ways I could give back to my community. I began to think of my background and heritage as assets, and I started to develop a sense of responsibility to make a positive difference in the lives of others.

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<sup>1</sup> This testimony and the opinions expressed at the November 29 hearing are solely those of Andrew J. Lee, and do not reflect the opinions of the Smithsonian Institution, Aetna Inc., the World Economic Forum, or any other organization or affiliation.

This responsibility became much clearer after I finished graduate school and moved to New York City to start my career. One day, I struck up a conversation with a friendly enough looking man and asked him if he had seen an interesting article about American Indians in that day's newspaper. He responded yes, he had seen the article. Then he added, *but I think they got it right in South America by wiping out the indigenous population*. Stunned by what I heard, I decided it was not a good idea to respond in the way I wanted. Instead, I said nothing and walked away.

The next morning, I decided I needed to get to know this person. So virtually every day for two years, I went out of my way to spend time with him. I discovered that he was a highly educated and widely respected individual. We talked about Wall Street, politics, history, and the arts – and I never brought up the repulsive remark he made. Over time, I introduced him to the concepts of Indian sovereignty and self-determination. Though I never would have imagined it possible, he eventually came to support the dignity, strengths, and diversity of this country's first peoples. When he died a few years ago, we lost an unlikely ally.

This experience in the mid-1990s showed me the importance of changing attitudes, the value of exchanging knowledge, and the need for individuals who are able – and willing – to build bridges of understanding across communities, cultures, and sectors. Perhaps most importantly, this experience taught me that I can help build those bridges.

My career has also been an amalgamation of experiences, with some unlikely twists. I had an incredible opportunity to work in the field of American Indian affairs for the better part of a decade, serving as the executive director of the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, where I was the founding director of the Honoring Nations tribal governance awards program. After that, nearly eight years ago, I decided to enter the business world, motivated in part by the fact there are so few Indians working in positions of leadership in corporate America and wanting to push myself with a completely new professional experience. Importantly, I have found I can build bridges in my own career by working for a world class Fortune 100 company while staying very involved in Indian affairs through volunteerism and board service. I have the privilege, for example, to serve as a trustee of the National Museum of the American Indian, which tells the real story of Native peoples in the Western Hemisphere, educating and inspiring millions of visitors from America and around the globe.

### **Ideas for Reclaiming Image and Identity**

Reflecting on my personal and professional journey, I would like to offer three ideas for how we can positively shape our image and identity for the next seven generations.

**First, our ability to reclaim our image and identity is inextricably tied to our continued support for the policy of self-determination.** Nearly two decades of research by my former colleagues at the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development points to a fundamental conclusion: *Successful Indian nations assert the right to govern themselves, and they exercise that right effectively by building capable and culturally appropriate institutions of*

*self-governance*. Astonishing success is possible when tribes seize control of their own futures, spend less time blaming ‘others’ for their problems and instead put themselves in the driver’s seat for decision making – on everything from running their health care to building and managing their own law enforcement systems, and from creating their own culturally relevant, yet stringent, standards for educational achievement to managing the natural resources on their lands in a responsible manner that is informed by tradition.

The Federal government can play an important role in helping Indian nations rise to their full potential by sustaining self-determination as the cornerstone of U.S. Indian policy. Clearly, a continuing view of Indian nations merely as wards of the Federal government is untenable. The Federal government can provide expanded opportunities for tribes to exercise their sovereignty in fresh ways, offer even greater flexibility in how funding is used within the confines of mutual accountability, and support tribal efforts to reform their constitutions and governments in culturally appropriate ways. It is telling that the policy of self-determination is the only policy approach in over a century that has led to meaningful improvements in the material health and welfare of Indian Country. The right way forward is to stay the course on self-determination, facilitating Indian nations’ ability to govern themselves to brighter futures.

**Second, we have a collective responsibility to showcase the incredible stories of tribal success in this era of self-determination.** Throughout history, American Indians have made enormous contributions to humanity. The Iroquois Confederacy was an important influence in the development of the Constitution of the United States of America. Sacajawea’s incredible leadership was instrumental to the success of the Lewis and Clark expedition. And Natives pioneered countless agricultural, medical, architectural, and other innovations on which the rest of the world now depends. As one of my distinguished colleagues in the field of Indian affairs is fond of saying, when it comes to Native America, “the truth is much more interesting than the lies.” Yet these truths are rarely communicated to the next generation.

Too often, we fail to pay sufficient attention to the impressive success stories of *contemporary* Native America, which are becoming easier to find. That needs to change. As we have learned from Harvard’s Honoring Nations tribal governance awards program, tribes are at the forefront of innovation, doing lots of small and big things that contribute to a better future for Native people and the world more generally:<sup>2</sup>

- ▶ Chartered under the laws of the Winnebago Tribe and wholly owned by the Tribe, Ho-Chunk, Inc. was launched in 1994 to diversify the Tribe’s business interests while maintaining a separation between business and tribal government. The general purpose company promotes economic self-sufficiency and creates jobs through its actively managed enterprises, joint ventures, and passive investments, which include hotels, convenience stores, websites, and an order fulfillment center. Today, Ho-Chunk,

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<sup>2</sup> Summaries provided by the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development at the John F. Kennedy School of Government. For more information, visit [www.hpaied.org](http://www.hpaied.org).

Inc. employs more than 1,400 people and has 24 businesses with operations in ten states and four foreign countries.

- ▶ The Lummi Indian nation established the Lummi Tribal Sewer and Water District in 1983 to ensure the Nation's role in the provision of safe drinking water and discharge of clean wastewater across and beyond its reservation, located 100 miles north of Seattle. The District's managerial, financial, and technical competence – emerging at a time when the Lummi Nation confronted serious challenges to its jurisdiction over non-tribally owned lands within the reservation – has enhanced tribal sovereignty while providing critical infrastructure services to the reservation's 5,000+ Native and non-Native residents.
- ▶ The Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians have long depended on the fish that live in Red Lake, the sixth largest body of freshwater in the United States, located in Minnesota. Both the waters and the walleye of the lake are central to the Red Lake Band people, its history, economy, and culture. But by the mid-1990s, the walleye population had collapsed from over-fishing. Taking drastic but necessary action, the Band negotiated a consensus arrangement with local fisherman and state and federal officials to ban fishing in the lake. Over a ten-year period the fish recovered at an astonishing rate. The tribally led Red Lake Recovery Project now determines when, how, and who can fish the historic waters from which the Band claims its name.
- ▶ For decades Tohono O'odham elders in need of skilled nursing had to move far away from family and friends to receive care, or stay home and forgo long term care services. However, with the opening of the Archie Hendricks, Sr. Skilled Nursing Facility, O'odham elders can now remain in the community. Combining today's latest technologies and world-class clinical care with traditional values, the nursing home has become one of the finest elder care facilities anywhere in the United States.
- ▶ The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) have become one of the largest employers in Eastern Oregon, and along with economic success came the return of tribal citizens. A lack of transportation options, however, prevented tribal citizens from taking advantage of local employment opportunities. In 2001, CTUIR Public Transit was started to address the need for public transportation. The comprehensive system includes both a free bus and a taxi voucher service, encompassing a large service area within and beyond the reservation boundaries, which is interconnected with other non-tribal regional systems. Remarkably, the transit system has helped alleviate poverty, promoted stronger inter-governmental relations, and facilitated cross-cultural understanding as Native and non-Native ride together.
- ▶ Created in 1999, the Zuni Eagle Sanctuary is the first eagle sanctuary owned and operated by Native Americans as well as the first aviary constructed for the purpose of cultural preservation. Combining both functional aspects of eagle care with an aesthetic that reflects the natural surroundings of Zuni, the Sanctuary is home to more than two

dozen eagles that otherwise would have been destroyed. Successfully meeting the Zuni's demand for molted eagle feathers that are used in religious and cultural ceremonies, the Sanctuary is also a model of intergovernmental cooperation between a tribal government and federal agency.

These and countless other stories of Native ingenuity and success are powerful. They give tribal decision makers fresh ideas and practical knowledge about how to create sustainable economies, improve service delivery, and manage vital resources. These stories also raise the bar for tribal government performance and shape dreams of what is possible.

At the same time, these success stories present a picture of Native America that is very different from what we see on television, and different from what children learn in social studies. These are stories that need to be told because they help restore Indian nations to their rightful place of honor among the world's nations.

**And finally, we need to accelerate the ascension of Natives into positions of influence in all areas of society – starting with tribal governments and extending beyond Indian Country.**

While there are many reasons why Natives have faced, and continue to face, long odds bringing individual achievement to scale, I believe we need to do better.

One area that needs our attention is tribal governance. No nation – Native or non-Native – can be successful over the long term without some of its best and brightest participating in public service. While there are a growing number of tribes developing, attracting, and retaining leadership from within their own populations, the unfortunate presence of nepotism, cronyism, and rent-seeking behavior persists in far too many places. Indian nations can stop the flood of talent leaving their reservations. The challenge for tribal leaders and, indeed, communities themselves is to create an environment where talent can be nurtured, where hard work is expected and appreciated, and where people with good ideas are encouraged and supported. To be sure, creating this kind of environment is not easy – but it is necessary.

The good news is that in this era of self-determination, there are many things Indian nations can do. I have been inspired by interventions made by forward-thinking tribes, such as investing in youth leadership programs that give young people a formal voice in tribal affairs, finding ways to engage off-reservation citizenry to participate in tribal government, developing formal training programs for tribal legislators and candidates so they are prepared to govern, and ensuring children on the reservation and in surrounding communities are taught tribal civics.

I would also submit that in an increasingly complex and interconnected world, we need more Natives to take on positions of leadership in business, non-Native government, and civil society. This does *not* conflict with the need to attract the best and brightest to serve in tribal government. Rather, it means we need to expand significantly the pool of available talent. Both the Federal government and the tribes can facilitate this through smart investments in education, training, and enrichment programs. I look forward to the day that Natives are

appropriately represented in institutions and programs with national and global significance. That we see more Native participation among the ranks of Rhodes scholars, MacArthur fellows, Young Global Leaders, White House Fellows, and Nobel prize winners. That more Native kids and young professionals set their sights on becoming U.S. ambassadors, serving as CEOs of global companies, becoming board members of major foundations, and launching start-ups. We need to set our sights high, make sure our young people know what opportunities exist, and work with diverse stakeholders in business, government, and civil society to make sure they are partnering with Indian Country not only because it is the right thing to do, but also because it leads to better outcomes for everyone.

### **Conclusion**

Like most Haudenosaunee, I was taught at an early age that before making important decisions, we have a responsibility to reflect on the wisdom of seven generations behind us, and to consider the impact of our decisions seven generations ahead.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for bringing this principle of seven generations to the fore. When it comes to image and identity, there is a lot at stake for Indian people. My own experiences working with Indians and non-Indians make me optimistic we can build new bridges of understanding. And a big part of what it'll take to reclaim our image and identity in a very positive way for the next seven generations is to stay steadfast in our support for self-determination, shine a bright spotlight on tribal success stories, and cultivate and accelerate Native leadership into positions of influence inside and beyond Indian Country.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

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